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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000049

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ASEC](#) [BA](#) [REFORM](#) [POL](#)

SUBJECT: POLICE, SHIA YOUTH CLASH DURING WEEKEND PROTESTS

REF: A. MANAMA 0013

[B](#). 05 MANAMA 1916

[C](#). 05 MANAMA 1910

Classified by Charge d'Affaires Susan L. Ziadeh for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Police clashed January 5 near the Ministry of Interior with a group of protesters that broke away from a larger rally in the downtown Manama souk area organized to protest the arrest of 17 youth for their involvement in a December 25 riot at Bahrain airport. Organizers claim the police fired rubber bullets and tear gas to disperse the group near MOI; a Ministry source told RSO that police used tear gas but not/not rubber bullets. In a January 6 speech, activist Abdul Hadi Al Khawaja threatened the government with a new "Intifada," the term Bahraini Shia use to refer to violence between the government and Shia youth in the mid-1990s. The continuing clashes represent a challenge by Al Khawaja and other like-minded rejectionists to both the government and leading Shia political society Al Wifaq, which has eschewed political demonstrations of late as it completed its registration with the government as a legal entity. End Summary.

Youth Confront Police Outside Interior Ministry

[1](#)2. (SBU) A small faction of the some 150 participants in a January 5 protest organized by the newly-formed "Committee for Solidarity with Activists and Prisoners of Conscience in Bahrain" clashed with riot police near the Ministry of Interior following a march through the downtown souk district of Manama. The rally was held to demand the release of 17 youth arrested for their participation in a December 25 riot at the Bahrain International Airport following the brief detention of Shia cleric Shaikh Mohammed Al Sanad (Refs B/C). Protesters and activists have begun referring to the 17, who broke windows and destroyed furniture inside the airport arrivals hall, as "prisoners of conscience."

[1](#)3. (C) The press reports that while the bulk of protesters were peaceful, a small group broke off and approached the Ministry of Interior compound, where they encountered riot police. Although reports vary on the sequence of events, it is clear that protesters threw stones at the police and police fired tear gas to disperse the group. Protest organizers claim police also fired rubber bullets. An MOI source told RSO that police launched tear gas at the protesters but did not/not fire rubber bullets. (Comment: There have been no credible reports of police use of rubber bullets since 2003.) Following the confrontation near MOI, youth in several Shia villages in and around Manama burned tires and hurled Molotov cocktails at police patrols responding to the fires. The press reports that some 12 people were injured in the earlier and later incidents, and the police made some arrests.

Al Khawaja Promises "New Intifada"

[1](#)4. (SBU) The following day, January 6, Shia political activist Abdul Hadi Al Khawaja, who has had numerous confrontations with security forces over the past 18 months, gave a provocative speech threatening the government with a "new Intifada," the term Bahraini Shia use to refer to long-running violence between the government and Shia youth during the mid-1990s. He said, "What happened to the demonstrators should not go without punishment. Everyone should do his duty in order to reach the truth, document it, and take a side. Informing international organizations about what happened should not be done by only a few activists, but all should participate." He continued, "Over the last two years we warned the government that the poor and unemployed people would go out on the street if their living conditions were not improved and sectarian and corruption issues were not resolved, but the government did not listen to us, which caused the latest confrontations. We now warn the government that the latest detentions of activists will lead to another Intifada. If protecting our constitutional rights requires a

new Intifada, then we would like to tell you that it is coming soon."

15. (SBU) Leading Shia cleric Shaikh Issa Qassem, in his January 6 Friday prayer sermon, called on protesters to halt their activities. He also urged the government to engage in a real dialogue with representatives of the Shia community about their grievances.

Comment

16. (C) The recurring clashes between Shia protesters and security forces represent a challenge by Al Khawaja and a few other rejectionist leaders to both the government and to leading political society Al Wifaq, which joined the system by registering as a political society with the Ministry of Justice late last year. These hardliners are trying to mobilize "the street" and gain attention through their confrontational tactics while the government avoids arresting Al Khawaja as they try to tamp down opposition. Al Khawaja's threat of another Intifada can be seen as an attempt to rally his supporters and rile the government. Al Wifaq, meanwhile, has been engaged in negotiating its charter with the Ministry of Justice and holding internal elections. Wittingly or not, Al Khawaja explicitly revealed a major plank in his strategy to pressure the GOB during his January 6 speech -- appealing to international organizations to intervene on the side of protesters. As Al-Wifaq regularizes its status and more strongly signals its intent to participate in the upcoming elections, we anticipate that those insisting on protesting outside of the system will continue trying to raise the stakes.

ZIADEH